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ABSTRACT

Past research on the employment interview has suggested that interviewers are influenced by many variables, including physical attractiveness. To investigate the potential interaction of applicant sex and attractiveness on hiring decisions, the type of job, applicant sex, and applicant physical attractiveness were manipulated to determine the effect of attractiveness on job performance. Resumes with unattractive or attractive photographs were shown to 105 interviewers who rated applicants on several dimensions. Results showed that physical attractiveness influenced employment decisions. More attractive individuals were thought to have better personalities. Employment interviewers were also influenced by the applicant's sex, so that males were generally offered higher starting salaries than females even when the two were equally rated on the decision of whether to hire. The findings, which differed from earlier research using the same materials with college students acting as interviewers, suggest that actual interviewers may have different biases than college students. (Author/JAC)

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Effects of Applicant Sex, Physical Attractiveness, and
Type of Job on Employment Interviewers' Decisions

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Running Head: Interviewers' Decisions

Effects of Applicant Sex, Physical Attractiveness, and Type of
Job on Employment Interviewers' Decisions

Research on the employment interview suggests that interviewers are influenced by many variables including first impressions, ideal applicant stereotypes, sex, age, job information, visual cues, and attitudes (Gilmore & Ferris, 1980; Ferris & Gilmore, 1977; Schmitt, 1976; Carlson, Thayer, Mayfield, & Peterson, 1971). Interviewers presumably collect considerable information during the interview and then use that information to make decisions about applicants. Obviously, one of the variables that could influence an interviewer's decision is the physical appearance of the applicant. Other research (Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Dion, Berscheid & Walster, 1972) indicates that people with attractive physical appearance are perceived as having more socially desirable traits and behavioral tendencies, including expected life happiness (including social and professional happiness) and expected occupational success. Thus, it is logical to assume that interviewers may be more favorably disposed to hire attractive than unattractive applicants.

A few studies have tested this possibility. Carlson (1967) found that there appeared to be a small effect of applicant appearance on the hiring decision for a sales job in the life insurance industry. Dipboye, Arvey, and Terpstra (1977) and Dipboye, Fromkin, and Wiback (1975) reported that physical attractiveness of the job applicant affected the hiring decision for a sales management trainee position and management trainee position in a furniture department of a department store, respectively. Thus, it appears

that attractiveness may be an asset for job applicants.

Two additional studies have investigated the selection effects of applicant attractiveness in combination with the type of job as a second independent variable. Cash, Gillen, and Burns (1977) investigated the joint effects of applicant sex and physical attractiveness, and they varied the type of job along a masculinity-femininity dimension. Regarding attractiveness, they found that the employment potential of attractive applicants of both sexes was rated higher than that of unattractive applicants, and that attractive applicants tended to be rated as more qualified than unattractive applicants for in-(sex) role jobs and neuter jobs. They did not find that attractiveness had an effect on the hiring decision, however. Heilman and Saruwatari (1979) found that attractiveness was an advantage for males in both a managerial and a clerical job, whereas it was an advantage for women applicants only in the clerical job. Thus, when the job is varied, the results are somewhat less consistent, but overall, it still seems that attractiveness is often an advantage.

Some of the results may have been due to the nature of the job being investigated in these past studies. There were a limited number of jobs, and many of them (e.g., the jobs in sales and some of the managerial jobs) may have been jobs in which physical attractiveness could even be conceived of as a job-relevant factor. That is, raters could assume that attractiveness is likely to help employees in these positions perform their jobs (because of the necessity to influence others in a face-to-face situation, in sales for example). Significantly, the studies that varied the type of job were

apparently more interested in the applicants' sex than in their attractiveness as an independent variable, since the job was varied along a sex appropriate dimension in one study (Cash, et al., 1977), and in the other study (Heilman and Saruwatari, 1979) it is stated in the method section that "attractive physical appearance in and of itself was of no apparent benefit in carrying out either job" (p. 362).

The present research investigated the potential interaction of applicant sex and attractiveness on hiring decisions while the type of job was varied as to whether attractiveness was seen as relevant to job performance. Earlier research (Beehr & Gilmore, in press) has demonstrated such an interaction when college students are asked to act as interviewers. The present research attempted to extend these findings to real job interviewers. In addition, interviewers' tendencies to attribute personality and ability traits based upon applicant sex and attractiveness were also investigated for their potential to explain why hiring bias may occur. Thus, this research attempted to separate the effects of applicant sex, physical attractiveness, and the type of job while studying the evaluations of real interviewers rather than college students.

Three hypotheses were proposed: (1) There will be an interaction between applicants' physical attractiveness and the relevance of attractiveness of a given job that affects interviewers' decisions regarding the applicant (whether to hire and what starting salary to recommend; (2) there will be an interaction between applicants' physical attractiveness and the relevance of attractiveness for a given job that affects interviewers'

attributes of job-specific characteristics to the applicants; and (3) interviewers make attributions of general characteristics to job applicants based on the applicants' physical attractiveness.

The first two hypotheses predict interactions and the third predicts a main effect (for applicant attractiveness). The type of interaction predicted is for a positive relationship between applicant attractiveness and the dependent variables for the attractiveness-relevant job and no relationship between applicant attractiveness and the dependent variables for the attractiveness-irrelevant job. The third hypothesis assumes that some general (not job-specific) characteristics will be attributed to applicants based on their attractiveness as past research has shown (e.g., Dion et al., 1972). There is little reason however, to expect the type of job for which the applicant is considered to affect these attributions.

Method

Participants

One hundred and five recruiters who visited two large universities during a spring semester and who volunteered to participate were randomly assigned to one of eight experimental conditions (a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design with applicant sex, applicant attractiveness, and type of job as the independent variables. Eighty percent of the recruiters were male, and the average tenure in their organization was 8.4 years and the average time that they had spent in recruiting was 5.15 years. The recruiters represented service, manufacturing, financial, and other organizations. Average recruiter age was 33.5 years.

Procedure

Each recruiter was given a packet containing a job description (randomly chosen from two descriptions within the participant's experimental condition), a resume with picture attached (randomly chosen from six resumes within the participant's experimental condition), and an interview transcript (identical for all conditions). When the participant had finished reading the materials, he or she was asked to provide ratings on a number of dependent variables. A more complete description of the interview transcript, resumes, and job descriptions is contained in Beehr and Gilmore, in press.

Dependent Measures

Interviewers' decisions. Participants' hiring and salary decisions were recorded on the following items on a seven-point scale:

1. Would you hire this applicant for the job described on the job description form?
2. The typical beginning salary for this job is between \$12,000 and \$18,000 per year. If this applicant were hired, what salary would you offer to applicant?

In addition, interviewers were asked to make a number of job-specific and general attributions using scales from Beehr and Gilmore, in press.

Results

Since previous research (e.g., Beehr & Gilmore, in press; Gilmore, Beehr, & Love, Note 1) found that many of the dependent measures were intercorrelated, a (2 x 2 x 2) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was computed. The MANOVA resulted in two significant main effects - one for

applicant sex ($p < .01$; Hotelling's $t = .177$; $F = 3.26$; $df = 5, 92$) and one for applicant attractiveness ($p < .05$; Hotelling's $t = .164$; $F = 3.01$; $df = 5, 92$).

The hypotheses which predicted interactions between the applicants' physical attractiveness and the type of job for hiring and salary decisions (Hypothesis I) and for job-specific attributions (Hypothesis II) were not supported. Hypothesis III, which predicted that the applicants' physical attractiveness would influence job-specific attributions also was not supported. The applicant's physical attractiveness did influence the job specific attribution of personality ($F = 12.66$; $df = 1, 96$; $p < .001$), but did not influence general personality attributions which were not directly connected to job performance. The attractive applicants were perceived as having a personality that better fit the job (mean = 4.85) when compared to the unattractive applicants (mean = 3.94).

Even though not hypothesized, the MANOVA main effect for applicant sex and significant univariate effect for the salary rating ($F = 4.07$; $df = 1, 96$; $p < .05$) suggested that recruiter's felt that males (mean = \$13,610) should be paid more than females (mean = \$13,120).

Discussion

This research is the third in a line of investigations to determine the impact of applicant attractiveness, applicant sex, and the type of job on interviewer decisions. These studies attempted to more carefully control the type of job which had been confounded with hierarchical level and/or sexual stereotypes in prior research by others. The first experiment (Beehr & Gilmore, in press) investigated applicant attractiveness and type

of job using photographs of males only and used male and female undergraduate students as subjects. An attractiveness x type of job interaction was found in which attractive males being considered for a job involving considerable face-to-face contact were given the highest "hire" ratings. The second experiment expanded this research to include female applicants so that applicant sex, physical attractiveness, and type of job were the independent variables (Gilmore, Beehr, & Love, Note 1). The hypothesized attractiveness x type of job interaction was marginally significant, and a main effect for applicant attractiveness was found.

The present research which is the third in this series of investigations attempted to replicate the second study on actual employment interviewers instead of college students. No attractiveness x type of job interaction was found, but main effects for both applicant sex and applicant attractiveness were present. For the actual interviewers, the type of job for which an applicant was being considered had no influence, while the sex of the applicant did. Attractiveness of the applicant also influenced the interviewers' decisions.

In all three of these investigations applicant attractiveness either as a main effect or in an interaction with the type of job, influenced the subjects judgments. This strong-impact of attractiveness is consistent with earlier research by others (e.g., Carlson, 1967; Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra, 1977; Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979), and suggests that an individual's physical attractiveness will forever haunt or help them in the search for a job. In the two earlier investigations by the current authors which

used college students as subjects, it seemed that physical attractiveness was relevant depending upon the type of job for which the applicant was being considered. The type of job manipulation did not influence the actual interviewers who were used in the third experiment. In the first two experiments which used college students, the sex of the applicant had no impact on ratings but sex had a strong main effect in the experiment using actual interviewers.

Thus, it appears that the physical attractiveness of the applicant influences selection decisions whether made by college students or actual interviewers and that more attractive individuals are seen as having more positive personality traits. College students appeared to be influenced by the type of job for which the applicant was being considered while interviewers were not. It could be hypothesized that students were more influenced by contextual demands (an actual job description) which had little influence on interviewers who may be accustomed to interviewing applicants for a variety of jobs. It appears that students adhere more to job analysis information than do interviewers. Another argument is that the job descriptions, even though pretested and found to be different, were not enough different to influence the "worldly" employment interviewers.

Ironically, if we assume that these interviewers were in fact too worldly to be influenced by differences in job descriptions, it seems unfortunate that they were influenced by the sex of the applicant which is carefully guarded against in the "real world." While there were no significant differences in the interviewers' decisions on whether to hire

applicants, the applicant's sex did influence the recommended starting salary. Thus, while interviewers did not discriminate markedly on hiring decisions, they would pay a female less money (about \$500 per year on the average).

The results of this present line of research suggest that using college students as interviewers may result in some differences when compared to actual employment interviewers. Bernstein, Hakel, and Harlan (1975) found students to be somewhat more lenient than interviewers, but otherwise not drastically different in their judgments. The present research suggests that while students tend not to engage in sex discrimination, actual interviewers may partially if salary judgments are involved.

Future research in this area should be careful to include many dependent variables. The present line of research found that global evaluations (hire) may be different from more subtle evaluations (salary). Interviewers were as likely to hire a male or female in this research, but they did recommend lower salaries for females who had identical qualifications for the job.

Finally, additional research might be directed toward different jobs. In these experiments all jobs were of the management trainee type, which is a fairly common class of jobs. Future research might look at jobs at different levels in the job hierarchy or at jobs with more or less technical skill requirements than management trainee. Care must be taken to avoid confounding the jobs studied with other variables (sex stereotypes, etc.).

Conclusions

It appears that physical attractiveness pervades most areas of a

person's life, including job selection processes. Physically attractive people are seen as having more positive personality characteristics, which likely influence employment decisions. In the present experiment, employment interviewers were also influenced by the applicant's sex so that males were generally offered higher starting salaries than females even though males and females were equally rated on the decision of whether to hire.

Reference Notes

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Footnotes

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